TELEVISION VIOLENCE AND ITS EFFECT ON CHILDREN

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by

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ABSTRACT

Much research has been done regarding the impacts of violence on television on children and adolescents. Many people, including myself, have no idea of the extensive amount of research available. This literature review served as a tool to bring together the most important research done on the topic of television violence. Many sources were discovered, obtaining a broad view of the many opinions about television violence and its effects. The three major effects of TV violence on children are discussed, followed by researchers' ideas on how to better television programming for the children of our society.

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Introduction

The average American child watches approximately 23 hours of television per week. Children spend more time watching TV than doing any other leisure activity. By the time they finish high school, most have spent more time in front of the TV than in the classroom (Strasburger, 1995). On average, a child will see 18,000 murders, robberies, bombings, assaults, and beatings in their years of watching television (Liebowitz, 1997). In today's society, the television is used for more than just entertainment. It provides a remedy for boredom, replaces after school activities, and substitutes as a babysitter or even as a parent.

Researchers and viewers alike have been convinced that violence on television is harmful to all viewers, especially children. During this review of the literature, it was noticed that most of the research is ten to twenty years old. If most people knew this fact, they would surely wonder why more investigation into the topic has not been done in recent years. Psychologist Dr. Leonard Eron stated in 1993 that "the scientific debate is over" (Strasburger, 1995, p. 19). In other words, researchers in this field feel that the connection between television violence and its ill effects on children has already been proven. However, it is important to continue this research in order to provide consumers with more up to date information. The debate may be over, but that does not mean that the public is educated about the potential ill effects of television viewing by children and adolescents. This review of current literature seeks to bring the information of these effects into the public eye.

Countless studies have been done in the past thirty years that maintain that television violence has strong effects on young people. Researchers purport that many consequences result from spending a large amount of time viewing television. Those who have found a correlation between television violence and real-life aggression repeatedly offer the same three results that

come from these viewings: increased aggression, desensitization, and an increased sense of fear. Most of these researchers agree that the "debate is over" in terms of the damage that TV violence does to children (Levine, 1996). In fact, Dr. Madeline Levine, a clinical psychologist, is convinced of that very thing.

> "Violence on television...is damaging to children. Forty years of research conclude that repeated exposure to high levels of media violence teaches some children...to settle interpersonal differences with violence. Children at younger and younger ages are using violence as a first, not a last, resort to conflict" (Levine, 1996, p. 3).

Levine goes on to state that "thousands" of professional journal articles document the same thing, and that the "real story" has been "withheld" from the public.

> "Children who are heavy viewers of television are more aggressive, more pessimistic, weigh more, are less imaginative, less empathic, and less capable students than their lighter-viewing counterparts" (Levine, 1996, p. 3).

Increased Aggression

Increased aggression, the first supposed consequence of television violence, is perhaps what parents, teachers, law enforcement agents, and researchers fear most. This aggression is the factor that leads most researchers to take on the task of "proving" television dangerous. Increased crime rates over the past few decades have certainly given television a bad reputation. People continually point their fingers at this industry as a major cause of real-life violence. What is it about TV that supposedly makes children mimic what they see to such a large degree?

"Children are great imitators," says Dr. Levine. "Even at young ages, infants mimic the facial expressions of caretakers" (Levine, 1996, p. 18). What children see, they do. This imitation of behaviors is a great thing when trying to teach a child a new task or a positive moral value. However, it's very devastating if television violence causes a child to harm another person or even themselves. Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, head of the Killology Research Group, and Gloria DeGaetano, founder of the Parent Coaching Institute, have a few thoughts on this issue.

> "As the content of television becomes more violent, so do our children. Since 1982, television violence has increased 780 percent and in that same time period, teachers have reported a nearly 800 percent increase of aggressive acts on the playground" (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999, p. 26).

John P. Murray agrees, suggesting that "children who watch a lot of violence on television may become more aggressive and/or they may develop favorable attitudes and values about the use of aggression to resolve conflicts" (Murray, 1997, p. 48).

When television began, it was only available at certain times of the day. Families would sit down and watch the programs together. When their favorite TV show ended, they would turn off the TV and either talk to each other about what had been viewed, or do something else, like listen to the radio (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999). Radio was a real competitor of the television, and the industry needed ways to keep the public's attention. This is when the "violence formula" first came about: "the more graphic and gratuitous the violence, the more viewers will watch" (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999, p. 27). This formula works until the level of violence on the TV is the same as that in real life. It is then necessary to increase the amount of violence in order to bring excitement back to the screen. More violence on screen and more violence in the world; back and forth, one outdoes the other. Is there a trend?

David Buckingham, Professor of Education with the Institute of Education at the University of London, feels that children do not know the difference between fiction and reality. This is why they imitate TV; it is their interpretation of the world.

> "Children copy what they see on television, because they lack the experience and the intellectual capacities that might enable them to see through the illusion of reality which the medium provides. They take what they watch as an accurate reflection of the world...because they are simply too immature to know any better" (Buckingham, 2000, p. 129).

Dr. Madeline Levine agrees to some degree. She states that while children do copy some acts from the television, they do not "simply imitate what they see on the screen...it is far more complex than simple imitation" (Levine, 1996, p. 19). Instead, they "choose only certain [behaviors] to be their own" (Levine, 1996, p. 19).

Two major studies have tested these effects of modeling on children. The first of these is one of the most significant studies ever done in the area of psychology. Albert Bandura's "Bobo doll" experiment investigated the condition under which children would learn and imitate aggressive acts (Strasburger, 1995). This complicated study began by separating a group of children into two sets: one control and one experimental. The experimental group then watched a film on a TV set. In the words of Albert Bandura,

> "The film began with a scene in which [an adult male] model walked up to an adult-size plastic Bobo doll and ordered him to clear the way. After glaring for a moment at the noncompliant antagonist the model exhibited four novel aggressive responses, each accompanied by a distinctive verbalization. First, the model laid the Bobo doll on its side, sat on it, and punched it in the nose

> while remarking, 'Pow, right in the nose, boom, boom.' The model then raised the doll and pummeled it on the head with a mallet. Finally, the model threw rubber balls at the Bobo doll, each strike punctuated with 'Bang.' This sequence...was repeated twice" (Strasburger, 1995, p. 22).

After these events, the children were again separated, this time into three groups. The first saw the man rewarded with candy, the second saw him reprimanded, and the third saw nothing. Then, each child was brought into the playroom and left to play with various toys, including the plastic Bobo doll, a mallet, and some rubber balls. Bandura and his associates found that the children who had witnessed the man being rewarded and those who had seen no follow-up action were more likely to show imitative behaviors than those who had seen the man punished. Those in the control group who had not seen any video showed few or none of the behaviors (Strasburger, 1995).

Richard Jackson Harris, a professor at Kansas State University, explains that these results do coincide with social learning theory, or observational learning, but that more often, it is "not the specific behavior itself that is learned from the media" (Harris, 2004, p. 261). He instead claims that the process of *disinhibition* "reduces normal inhibitions that people have against performing violent acts" (Harris, 2004, p. 261).

> "TV may be breaking down the normal inhibitions that we would otherwise have against engaging in violence. Thus, actual violent behavior may occur in the future with less provocation than would have been necessary to evoke it prior to the disinhibition" (Harris, 2004, p. 261).

Most people are taught that violence is bad, but repeated exposure to violence on TV may cause attitudinal changes in the acceptance of violence (Harris, 2004).

A second study dealing with the effects of television on aggression is Tannis McBeth Williams' Notel experiment in 1986. Notel, a small Canadian town, had never received television because of its location in a deep valley. One year before television was introduced to Notel, data was collected on many variables, including children's aggression. Unitel, a town with limited television service, and Multitel, a town with ordinary television service, were also surveyed for a comparison. After only two years of exposure to television, Notel children began to display increased levels of aggression, regardless of gender or initial level of aggression (Levine, 1996). In fact, rates of physical aggression among Notel's children had increased by 160% (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999). This study is very important because it is nearly impossible to find such a large group of children who have never been exposed to television.

Dr. Madeline Levine feels that there are certain variables that determine the effectiveness of a television message to teach children violence. The first of these is a child's ability to identify with a character. People are much more likely to imitate others who are attractive, powerful, and respected (Levine, 1996). This is because by imitating this type of person, we in turn "borrow" some of their power and respect. The more we identify with a character, the more we imitate them. Perhaps this is why researchers are so concerned about who is committing violence on TV. By a margin of almost two to one, the "good guys" of television are actually responsible for more murders than the "bad guy" (Levine, 1996). With the knowledge that we imitate those we respect and admire, it is surely not good that these "admirable" people are performing the most violent acts. When violence is seen as the "manly" and proper way to solve crime, due process just flies out the window. No longer are young people using their brains to work out their problems; more and more they resort to violence. Television stars make these acts "okay" and acceptable.

The second variable in Dr. Levine's list is the amount of reinforcement given to the violent act (Levine, 1996). Several studies have shown that children are more likely to imitate violence if it has been rewarded (Levine, 1996). Rewarded violence is seen routinely in the media. For example, a bully picks on people day after day without receiving punishment. Finally, someone has enough and punches the bully in the face. Everyone praises this person for standing up to the bully. When this scene is seen on TV, kids realize that it is okay to use these measures to solve problems. Although this kind of situation may seem trivial to a child's life, explains Dr. Levine, the "cumulative effects" of these acts create problems in the end (Levine, 1996).

Levine's final variable is the realistic effect of the violence.

> "Realistic violence is seen as 'telling it like it is' – a truer reflection of the world than violence that is obviously fictionalized. For adolescents, television's realism is the most important consideration in the relationship between viewing violence and behaving aggressively. Overblown and unrealistic [violence] makes real violence less likely" (Levine, 1996).

In a study by Seymour Feshbach of UCLA, the amount of realism was tested to find its role in aggression. Children were shown a movie about a riot. They were either told that the film was a fictitious Hollywood movie or that it was a newsreel of an actual riot. Afterwards, the children were given the opportunity to push a peer. Feshbach found that those children who believed they were witnessing real violence from the film were more aggressive than the others (Levine, 1996). The problem with this is that children find different things to be real at different ages. It is important to mention that while a three-year-old finds Big Bird to be real, a seven-year-old finds

realness Roseanne. It is not until age nine that "real" means the same thing to children as it does to adults (Levine, 1996).

Researcher Leonard Berkowitz has many of the same views as Dr. Levine. In his research, Berkowitz found similar results in terms of rewarded and realistic violence. However, he also discovered some new variables to add on to Levine's list. First, if a child is angry at the time they watch the violent act, he or she is more likely to behave aggressively (Levine, 1996). Second, cues in television are very important in teaching children what is right and wrong, especially in the case of handguns. The constant presence of guns on the screen encourages their use in real-life situations (Levine, 1996). A third variable in Berkowitz's research is the justification of television violence. "Observing justified violence is more likely to 'cue' aggressive modeling in the viewer," says Dr. Victor Strasburger, a pediatrician and adolescent medicine specialist at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine (Strasburger, 1995, p. 9). This theory parallels Levine's "identity" variable in that violence that is portrayed as necessary and justified by the "good guy" is more likely to be imitated by children.

Desensitization

Desensitization is the second major effect of television violence on children. Researchers have found that as children watch more violence, they become calloused to the cruelty seen on screen (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999).

> "...A 'so what' attitude begins to frame the context by which horrific acts are seen. Images of violence as 'cool' serve to reinforce deviant attitudes and result in less empathy, compassion, and understanding for human suffering" (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999, p. 33).

Richard Jackson Harris goes further, stating,

> "Viewing a steady diet of violence in the media makes us less sensitive to it...and less aroused and bothered by it. We become so used to seeing people wasted, blown apart, or impaled that it no longer particularly troubles us" (Harris, 2004, p. 267).

Some people may argue that this is a good thing; if our children aren't bothered by what they are seeing, then the violence isn't doing as much harm as originally thought. Maybe they won't imitate it if it's not having a great effect on them. However, there is much to fear from this desensitization effect. Primarily, it makes people "less likely to intervene or seek help for victims," explains Dr. Madeline Levine (Levine, 1996, p. 31). According to a Singer & Singer study done in 1980, children exposed to TV violence were less likely to intervene when they saw other children fighting or vandalizing (Strasburger, 1995).

How does this desensitization occur? It is actually very similar to a well-known psychological occurrence known as classical conditioning. This is best explained by example. A child is sitting in his favorite beanbag chair watching television. He feels relaxed and happy until he comes upon a program ridden with vulgarity and brutality. He is afraid and disgusted at what he sees. However, when the comfort of his beanbag chair is paired continually with the brutal violence of TV, violence becomes associated with that situation. The child then sees the violence as relaxing and comfortable. He has been "conditioned" to no longer find violence scary and disgusting, but entertaining and pleasant. Desensitization works in the same way, changing a child's mindset over time to accept what once frightened him. Authors Grossman and DeGaetano use a different example to explain this effect:

> "If screen violence seems like an addictive drug, you're on the right track. The more one takes in, the stronger the next dose must be in order to attain the same level of response. The fact that all forms of media violence...have become more and more graphically brutal and sensational attests to the effectiveness of desensitization" (Grossman and DeGaetano, 1999, p. 35).

Dr. Levine describes it in yet another manner:

> "If we are sitting at home working on a project and it begins to rain heavily, we may be startled at first, but we quickly become accustomed to the sound and are able to go on with our work. If the rain continued to demand our attention, raised our heart rate, and made us anxious, we would accomplish very little. By itself, desensitization is neither good nor bad, but simply a type of learning" (Levine, 1996, p. 32).

This type of learning could unfortunately begin to make our children more tolerant of violence in the real world.

A study performed by Edmond Burke in the mid-seventies shows an example of how young people react in a situation where they are put in charge. Fifth-grade children were either assigned to watch 15 minutes of a crime drama, which included several shootings, or 15 minutes of a baseball game. Then, the researcher instructed each child to monitor two younger children on a television screen. He told them that the children should be okay, but to alert him if anything out of the ordinary were to happen. The TV monitor then showed the two kids getting into a fight, which turned into hitting and kicking. The camera was even knocked over, going dead after it crashed to the ground. All of the children saw the same recorded scene. The results of

this study showed that the children who had watched the violent program were 5 times less likely to go for help than those who watched the baseball game (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999).

Because arousal is highly correlated with quick intervention in emergencies, it is a problem that children are becoming *less* aroused when audience to television violence (Levine, 1996). With fewer levels of excitement a child receives from viewing violence on TV comes less of a chance that they will help someone who is a victim of real-life violence. If this desensitization effect continues, society is likely to fall indifferent to violence.

Increased Fear

The third major effect that television violence has on children is cultivation or an increased fear of the world. Grossman and DeGaetano explain how it alters children's' concepts of reality:

> "[It] changes his or her attitudes and values. TV creates a perceived need for guns, which in turn creates violence, which reinforces the 'need' for guns, and so on, in an endless, tragic spiral" (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999, p. 37).

Though an increased amount of firearms is a frightening thought, this concept of fear goes further than firearms. Many children report reactions to television violence such as anxiety, sleep disturbances, nightmares, stomachaches, and the constant fear of being killed (Harris, 2004). These things could cause problems for children in the future.

Researcher George Gerbner has studied the effects of television on children for years. In the early nineties, he and his associates released much information stating "a steady diet of violent programming caused children to see the world and other people as more dangerous than they actually are" (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999, p. 37). This effect was dubbed "the mean

world syndrome" and is well known today. The research suggested that television was able to create a worldview accepted by most people. Sometimes, this worldview is accurate; other times it is misleading. Some of the results are as follows:

> "Heavy viewers are more likely to overestimate their chances of involvement in a violent crime, to believe that their neighborhoods are unsafe, and to assume that crime rates are rising...They see the real world through the lens of a camera which focuses disproportionately on violence and victimization" (Levine, 1996, p. 29).

FCC Chair Newton Minow predicted all of this in his famous "vast wasteland" speech in 1961.

> "I can assure you that you will observe a vast wasteland. You will see a procession of game shows, violence ...formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, western bad men...private eyes, gangsters, more violence and cartoons (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999, p. 38).

Of course, he was referring to the television of the early sixties. Surely, the violence is even worse today.

Some people try to say that violent television is just a reflection of an imperfect, violent world. However, the amount of violence on television is grossly misrepresented in comparison to real life. Richard Jackson Harris offers some FBI statistics as evidence.

> "About 87% of real crimes are nonviolent, but only 13% of crimes on reality-based TV entertainment are. For murder, the contrast is even stronger: only 0.2% of crimes reported to the FBI are murders, whereas 50% of the crimes on TV are murders (Harris, 2004, p. 256).

It is important to note at this point that it is not a single instance of violence that produces such a great effect on children; it is "indirect, subtle, and cumulative," states Dr. Strasburger (Strasburger, 1995, p. 10). He goes on to explain Bryant & Rockwell's "stalagmite effect," described as "cognitive deposits built up almost imperceptibly from the drip-drip-drip of television's electronic limewater" (Strasburger, 1995, p. 10). Because children in today's society are watching more television than ever, this effect becomes a bigger threat each day. Dr. Madeline Levine makes such an observation:

> "It is foolish to argue that such an [inaccurate, pessimistic, and violent] worldview, presented hour after hour, day after day, year after year, would not affect our children. We are all affected by what we see, children more than adults because they have fewer alternative sources of information" (Levine, 1996, p. 30).

Additional Effects

In addition to the three most recognized effects of television violence on children, researchers have identified several others. These are not always seen as reputable, but a couple are still worth mentioning. The first of these is called sensitization, a reverse modeling effect. This concept suggests that some viewers are so disturbed by the violence they see on TV that they are, as a result, less likely to imitate it (Harris, 2004). Sensitization occurs most often when the viewer is able to imagine himself or herself as the victim. These people "vicariously experience the negative emotions that person would feel" (Harris, 2004, p. 264). Richard Jackson Harris also explains that this effect is likely to occur during violence that is clearly realistic, such as the acts of violence seen on news programs. Many people do not consciously

see the news media as violent, so they do not consider it to be harmful to children or adults. They may see it as "educational," therefore not damaging. Though these effects are not as established as those of its opposite concept, desensitization, sensitization is still an important concept.

The second effect, catharsis, is not widely supported by research. This theory extends back to the time of Aristotle when he said his drama "purged the emotions of the audience" (Harris, 2004, p. 274). The concept was later embraced by Sigmund Freud, who claimed the impulses of the "id" were dealt with by a "sublimated substitute activity," like watching violence on television (Harris, 2004, p. 274). Harris describes catharsis as "the emotional release...that comes from venting the impulse...expressing it directly or indirectly" (Harris, 2004, p. 274). However, this apparent decrease in violent behavior as a result of exposure to violence on television is not well documented. Tests to prove the modeling theory have almost always been supported, whereas those having to do with catharsis rarely have (Harris, 2004). Most find this concept to be outdated and obsolete.

Legislation and Policy Changes

If there are so many negative effects that come from watching television violence, what has been done for improvement? Nearly since the beginning of television, people have thought that it was too violent. In fact, in 1952 only a few, short years after the television was first introduced, the first U.S. Congressional hearings were being held to see if TV violence was causing more aggression in children. At that time, only a quarter of the American households had TV sets. The programming was slow and boring compared to modern shows (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999). Programs at that time were meant to both entertain and inspire, while giving

children an educational base, as well. However, families were not doing what the television executives had hoped for. Not totally enthralled with the TV, many families chose other forms of entertainment such as the radio or various games. The networks needed some way to make television appealing all the time.

In the mid-50s, the television networks introduced the "violence formula," which purports that the more graphic violence is aired, the more people will watch (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999). As discussed earlier, this works until real life violence matches that which is onscreen. After this, more violent content is necessary in order to keep viewers' attention.

Around the same time, the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency began hearing experts testify on the dangers of violent TV. Many highly regarded experts gave evidence over the years to show that the risk of television violence was not worth the small payoff. In fact, in 1969, Senator John Pastore, chair of the Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, invited the surgeon general of the United States to testify. The surgeon general had just finished his first report that linked smoking and lung cancer. Afterward, he commented on television violence and named it a public health issue, just as he had with the smoking and lung cancer relationship (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999). "The ball was rolling," says Grossman and DeGaetano (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999, p. 28). Incidentally, this set in motion the model for expert testimony that Senate subcommittees still utilize today.

In 1972, Surgeon General Jesse Leonard Steinfeld released the report, "Television and Growing Up: The Impact of Televised Violence" (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999). This report, consisting of sixty new research projects, presented strong evidence that TV violence could possibly be detrimental to children. It also further verified the likelihood of aggression after viewing television violence (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999).

The National Institute of Mental Health issued another key report in 1982. This review of over 2,500 studies found a "consensus" among researchers about television violence.

> "...In magnitude, television violence is as strongly correlated with aggressive behavior as any other behavioral variable that has been measured" (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999, p. 29).

The FCC began discussing deregulation of children's programming in 1984. At that time, violence on children's shows had reached the highest level in twenty years, with thirty-three acts of violence during each hour (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999). As a result of deregulation of the industry that same year, toy companies were able to make cartoons based on their products. This started the trend of thirty minute "commercials" for certain toys and action figures which basically "overran the television industry" (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999, p. 39). A 600 percent increase in action figures and other cartoon toys by 1987 demonstrated the success by these television sponsors (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999).

Television became even more violent as the 1980s neared its end, and the United States Congress realized that something must be done. Congress passed the Television Violence Act in 1990, which gave the television industry "temporary antitrust immunity." This was supposedly done in order to prompt the industry to develop "voluntary guidelines" on TV violence (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999, p. 39).

In the same year, the Children's Television Act passed in the Senate and the House, despite President Bush's refusal to sign it (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999). This act had two principal provisions:

> "1. Commercials during children's programs could not exceed 10.5 minutes per hour on weekends and 12 minutes per hour on weekdays.

2. Television broadcast licenses could not be renewed unless the station had complied with the first provision and had served the 'educational and information needs of children' by providing at least three hours a week of educational programming" (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999, p. 40).

Over the next few years, networks considered such shows as *G.I. Joe* and *The Jetsons* to be educational programming. Parents and experts would disagree, generating much criticism and pleas for change from viewers (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999).

By 1992, the Television Violence Act had morally and legally forced the TV industry to create some guidelines. The television industry called this group of standards a "Statement of Principles" (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999). The standards included:

- "Children's programs should attempt to contribute to the sound, balanced development of children and to help them achieve a sense of the world...
- "Violence...should not be used exploitatively. Programs involving violence should present the consequences of violence..."
- "...Violence should avoid the excessive, the gratuitous, and the instructional"
- "Care should be exercised when children are involved in...violent behavior" (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999, pp. 41-42).

However, just because they were "forced" to set up these tenets, they were not technically forced to follow them. Most consumers would agree that not everyone in the television industry is following these principles.

In 1996, Congress required that "V-chips," computer chips which allow parents to block out certain violent or sexual programming, be put in all televisions within two years (Dudley, 1999). In 2000, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) furthered the efforts of

Congress by making the V-chip a requirement as well (The FCC, 2004). To be more specific, the V-chip uses a coding process in which ratings are given to each program based on its sexual or violent content. When a parent chooses to "block" a certain rating, the V-chip reads the encoded information and does not allow these programs to be transmitted (The FCC, 2004).

Many consumers and experts found the V-chip to be a great idea, noting that it would give parents a break from having to keep such a close eye on what their children were watching. However, others felt that the V-chip may infringe on First Amendment rights. Solveig Bernstein, director of information studies at the Libertarian Cato Institute, explains:

> "The First Amendment is to protect the media from the political process. The V-chip...does away with those protections in an instant. I see the V-chip as coming dangerously close to government censorship" (Bernstein, 1999, p. 94).

Supporters of the technology respond to these types of comments by saying that it is up to the individual parents and consumers to decide whether the V-chip will be activated.

Beginning in 1996, networks were asked by Congress to devise a system of voluntary ratings (Dudley, 1999). It was not until July of 1997 that the television networks (except NBC) agreed on a system. The original TV guidelines are as follows:

> TV-Y – This rating is suitable for all children, and is especially designed for those who are very young . These programs will not frighten young children from ages 2-6.
>
> TV-Y7 – Appropriate for children over the age of 7, it is geared toward those with developmental skills that can distinguish reality from make-believe. It may frighten those under age 7.
>
> TV-G – This programming is fitting for all ages. It is not specifically designed for any certain age group, but it has little to no violence, bad language, or sexual content.

TV-PG – "Parental Guidance" is recommended when viewing these programs. It is even suggested that parents watch these with their children.

TV-14 – Parents are cautioned against allowing children and adolescents under the age of 14 to view programs under this rating. They are urged to take greater care when monitoring their child's TV viewing habits.

TV-MA – These programs are designed for adults. Television shows with this rating may be unsuitable for youth under the age of 17 (The FCC, 2004).

Some additional letters may be added to these initial ratings: "V" for violence, "S" for sexual situations, "L" for language, and "D" for "suggestive dialogue" (Dudley, 1999, p. 152). These letters increase in severity as the ratings become more mature (The FCC, 2004). For example, a TV-PG, L rating would have fewer occurrences of coarse language than a TV-MA, L rating.

Parental Regulation

For these ratings to work, it is necessary for parents to regulate their child's television viewing habits. Without the cooperation of parents, this system will not be successful. Dr. Madeline Levine offers a list of suggestions to lessen the negative effects of television violence in her book, Viewing Violence. These are meant as guidelines for parents who want to "encourage the positive effects for their children" (Levine, 1996, p. 204).

Dr. Levine's first idea is that parents watch TV with their children. This helps to increase comprehension of the material, decrease stereotypical thinking, and increase prosocial behavior (Levine, 1999). "When parents actively discuss and explain what they're viewing," Dr. Levine states, "the youngsters' understanding of television content improves" (Levine, 1999, p. 205). She emphasizes the fact that a parent simply being in the room with a child does not help.

Parents need to "comment, explain, and interpret" that which the child is viewing (Levine, 1999, p. 205). Children need help when to "sort out and understand" messages which are being delivered via television and any media source (Levine, 1999, p. 205).

The next suggestion given by Dr. Levine is that children are put on a "television diet" (Levine, 1999). She explains that children should use television for educational and informational purposes, not as a babysitter or a solution for boredom. This does not necessarily mean that children should only be allowed to watch educational programs. However, those which stimulate their thinking are more beneficial. Dr. Levine mentions nearly twenty programs, many of which are shown on PBS, which she finds both amusing and informative for children. *Mister Rogers, Barney,* and *Sesame Street* are all mentioned multiple times throughout Dr. Levine's book as excellent programs. She also refers to *The Magic School Bus, Reading Rainbow, Carmen Sandiego,* and *Full House* as television shows that can serve the dual purpose of entertainment and education (Levine, 1999). It is quite common on these programs that children learn a lesson on morals or even a new skill.

The third guideline of Dr. Levine is teaching children to watch television with a purpose. Parents can not allow their children to "mindlessly channel surf through life" (Levine, 1999, p. 209). They need to live it for themselves.

> "Television is a vehicle, a means to an end; it is not a way of life. Children need to be taught that the television, just like every other appliance in the house, has a specific function. We do not leave the toaster on once the toast has popped up. We recognize the specific uses of these appliances and know when to shut them off. Children need to be similarly educated about television" (Levine, 1999, p. 209).

By sitting down with children and choosing specific programs to watch can help teach responsible viewing habits.

> "Television is not a device that we passively allow to fill up dead space; rather, it is a source of entertainment and education that we actively pursue" (Levine, 1999, p. 209).

Giving children other cultural opportunities, like the theater, a museum, or reading, shows them that there is more to the world than just television. Children need to be active in hobbies or sports instead of being a spectator to these things on television (Levine, 1999).

Dr. Victor Strasburger has a similar set of suggestions in his book Adolescents and Media. However, his are not aimed directly at parents, offering the guidelines to society in general. First, he states that the "quality of programming for children and adolescents must be improved" (Strasburger, 1995, p. 93). He claims that the television industry is not providing an ample amount of "educational" programming for children, with *The Jetsons* considered educational because it "teaches children about the future" (Strasburger, 1995, p. 94). He also calls out to broadcasters to "adhere to" the voluntary guidelines outlined previously, which they themselves set up.

Dr. Strasburger's second suggestion demands an improvement in the "nature and rules of advertising" (Strasburger, 1995, p. 95). Often times, "program-length commercials" are played off as cartoons to benefit toy manufacturers (Strasburger, 1995). After the FCC deregulated television, networks were allowed to air "as much commercial time as they wanted" (Levine, 1999, p. 94). This was the birth of "program-length commercials," such as *He-Man* and *Care Bears* (Levine, 1999).

Another problem with the advertising is that commercials aired during children's programming promote unhealthy eating habits among kids (Strasburger, 1995). Sugary cereals, soft drinks, candy bars, and fast food restaurants reign over Saturday morning line-ups and other most children's networks. One exception to that rule is the *Disney Channel*, which advertises nothing but the network's own programs.

Another of Dr. Strasburger's suggestions is an increase in media literacy for children and adolescents. He feels that is necessary to "demystify the media for young children" (Strasburger, 1995, p. 97). This parallels Dr. Madeline Levine's idea that parents who watch and discuss television with their children help to increase comprehension of the material. Strasburger agrees and adds something of his own:

> "Parents can play a preeminent role in creating media-literate children, but only if they watch TV and movies with their children and explicitly discuss what is being viewed" (Strasburger, 1995, p. 97).

Multiple curricula have been developed around the country to help children and adolescents better understand the television programs and commercials viewed. For example, the Yale Singers developed eight lessons designed to make children aware of multiple aspects of the television: the process for producing television programs and special effects, the different stereotypes seen on TV, and ways in which television violence is different from real-life (Strasburger, 1995). Dr. Madeline Levine and Dr. Victor Strasburger both find these types of interventions beneficial for good television watching habits.

Conclusion

As outlined above, there are three major effects of television violence on children and adolescents. Researchers have found occurrences of increased aggression, desensitization, and an increased fear of society. It is very important to understand these concepts, as they are the result of television's harmful effects on children in today's society.

Nearly all of the researchers agree that violence on TV is not the only explanation for violent children. In fact, many of them say that it only contributes to less than 20% of the problem. The other 80% is due to social factors. Poverty, racism, urban crowding, drugs, neglect, weapons, etc. all largely contribute to societal violence (Harris, 2004). However, researchers concur that even the small amount of influence on a child's behavior is a significant reason to change the actions of the television industry. Dr. Madeline Levine stresses the importance of regulating a child's TV viewing habits:

> "While occasional exposure to screen violence is not likely to be damaging to the vast majority of American children, a steady diet of it promises to contribute to an increasingly violent, impulsive, and desensitized society" (Levine, 1996, p. 57).

Though Dr. Levine criticizes the excessive viewing of television by children, she emphasizes that TV can be beneficial, as well. This conclusion is very important, because it shows that researchers are not trying to demonize television. They simply ask for a team effort from parents and the television industry to not only create good programs for children, but to also help children choose programming that is most beneficial to them. Researchers agree that it can be used as a valuable tool for education.

"Television can teach tolerance and cooperation. It can reduce prejudice and increase helping behavior. It can introduce children to different peoples, cultures, and ideas. The media can be used to develop community, to reinforce the values of honesty and integrity, and to educate children to be citizens of the world" (Levine, 1996, p. 230).

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